



Wetherby's Gallery of Early Iowa

by Marybeth Slonneger

On a sunny autumn day in 1854, the attention of 34-year-old Isaac Wetherby was drawn to a crowd gathering around the doorway of the limestone capitol (*above*). The square was surrounded by a white board fence, paid for by local businessmen to keep out grazing animals. As Wetherby steadied his heavy camera, oxen pulling a farm wagon loaded with melons passed in the foreground. Although the oxen moved slowly, they are blurred in the image.

The daguerreotypes that Isaac Wetherby produced in 1854 are the earliest photographic images of what was then the capital of Iowa, Iowa City. Wetherby was also one of the earliest portrait painters in the state. Painting and photography were Wetherby's

dual approaches to survival as an artist. His career stands at the transition between image-making with paint and brushes and the rapid and minutely detailed record of a photograph. As a young man, he had attempted to make a living by painting portraits. In his adult years, he learned how to succeed in an economy of mass-production photography.

His interest in art and in the emerging photographic processes can be gleaned from daybooks that he kept for 20 years as a record of his business dealings. The daybooks follow his journey to the Midwest, where he attempted farming, failed at it, and settled in Iowa City. They continue through the opening of his gallery and early years of studio production in Iowa City. They then mark the end of his career and retirement from business. Through the daybooks and the images Wetherby produced, we glimpse his love of the visual record and his view of early Iowa.

Born in 1819 in Rhode Island, Wetherby was raised and educated on the East Coast. Although he took a few lessons from an itinerant sign painter, he was largely self-taught. He had to learn how to mix his pigments, pose his subjects, and promote his work. Gradually, he acquired commissions in the Boston area, even though portraiture was a highly competitive field. Boston directories listed 30 portrait painters, nine miniature painters, and numerous landscape artists.

A momentous change in 1839 affected Wetherby's working life. Samuel F. B. Morse sailed back to America from Paris with news of the discovery of a new form of "painting" using the rays of the sun. Morse and others began to popularize Louis Jacques Daguerre's technique in America. When the announcement of the daguerrean photograph reached Boston, Wetherby must have realized its importance to artists. Daguerreotypes provided an immediate answer to someone like him, who had struggled to capture the proportions of a

sitter's hands or the qualities of skin and hair that render them lifelike in oil paint. Photography reduced the time needed for sittings—from the week needed for an oil painting to several minutes.

Wetherby bought his first camera in 1841. He was among a disparate group of people responding to this new phenomenon of photography but who had no special training in the process. Not all who attempted to take photographs were successful, nor was Wetherby. Sadly, he noted that nine months after the first camera trade, he "did not succeed with it." His wish to capture likenesses in the daguerrian method had to be delayed until a later time, when he purchased a different and probably improved camera and took lessons from someone more knowledgeable.



Ambrotype of Isaac Wetherby, in a photographer's smock, circa 1862.

In 1853 Wetherby decided to leave New England during a severe economic crisis. While it would mean leaving the network of clients that he had established, he imagined a new life on the western frontier, which then included Iowa. Through a Tama County land agent, he purchased a warrant for a 40-acre wooded lot on Richland Creek on January 25, 1854. Late that spring he started west with his family and in-laws, leaving them in Rockford, Illinois, in July when he traveled on to Tama County to see his land. Then he went to Iowa City to register his deed at the land office there. While in town, he rented a small space on the second floor of a commercial building and opened a "Daguerrian Room." There is no indication in Wetherby's daybook of whether he had been planning to set up the studio or was inspired by the thriving capital.

According to Wetherby's daybook, his first customer climbed the stairs to his studio on August 1, 1854, posed for the camera, and then bought the daguerreotype in a matted case for \$1.50. Mr. Spencer, a schoolmaster, also stopped by that day to have a picture taken. Most of the other sitters in the first few weeks were not named in Wetherby's daybook, but then individual names begin to appear: Mr. Levi Kauffman, a nurseryman, and Mr. Williams of Williamsburg.

On August 14, Wetherby recorded in his daybook: "rainy & dull, no dags." But sunlight returned on the 17th and Wetherby reordered stock for \$7.00, probably from an Illinois supplier. He must have been pleased to read the announcement in the *Iowa State Journal & Sunbeam* that day that he "thinks of making a permanent residence in Iowa City. He understands also portrait painting."

On August 29 he wrote: "96° in the shade." On September 1, he noted: "Hot as the very d—I. got to 110° in shade." He was experiencing his first midwestern heat wave, but customers continued to arrive, undeterred by the heat. From influential lawyers to newly arrived immigrants, males and females, young and old, they all wanted to pose for his camera and buy their own finely detailed likenesses recorded on the sensitized metal, and set within an elegant case. Their faces document the 19th-century world of merchants, teachers, plasterers, children, doctors, society folk, and laborers.

After only three months, Wetherby closed his Daguerrian Room and returned to Rockford. Over the next few years, he traveled in Illinois and Wisconsin, setting up temporary studios, learning the new wet-plate technique and the ambrotype format, painting dolls' heads and political and advertising banners, and drawing illustrations for lecturers on temperance and phrenology. He also tried his hand at farming his land in Tama County, but the farm failed in 1859. He gave up his dream to be a farmer, auctioned off his farm equipment, wagons, rhubarb plants, and one peach tree, and mortgaged 20 acres of timberland.

Meanwhile, Iowa City had continued to grow (even though its residents already knew in early 1855 that the capital would shift to Des Moines). In September 1856, an Iowa City friend wrote to him that "there are a great many Brick buildings going up this season the place has altered very much." By 1861, Wetherby had returned to Iowa City, bought a small cottage, and set up temporary photography studios in a neighboring county.

With the start of the Civil War, Wetherby enlisted in a local company, but it did not form as planned. Instead he was ordered to Camp McClellan in Davenport to paint numbers and initials on regimental drums, knapsacks, and haversacks. In September, he steamed down the Mississippi River to Benton Barracks in St. Louis

with the 11th Regiment in pursuit of more lettering. He earned enough money from the work to buy his son a pair of shoes.

The heady atmosphere of war created such a demand for photographs of soldiers and their loved ones that Wetherby seized the opportunity. Again he rented a small space in Iowa City, this time above a tobacco store, and called it the Wetherby Gallery.

The quickness of the decision may indicate that it was not entirely thought out, for Wetherby was soon out of photographic supplies. Two regiments were stationed in town at Camp Pope and "there is a rush for pictures. Can not get stock to do with." He again ordered supplies from Chicago, but they arrived just after the soldiers had left by train. Iowa City was now "dull," he



Wetherby's customers could choose between an oil portrait for about \$18 or a daguerreotype for about \$1.50. This glass nameplate measures 3½" x 7½".



wrote, with "three [photographers] in town." Nonetheless, when a spacious set of rooms became available in a third-floor space across the street, he opted to move (and remained there for 12 years). Later in the war, the government instituted a luxury tax for commercial photography, and he was taxed from March 1864 to May 1865, when the gallery was at its most prosperous.

In the decade after the war, Wetherby appeared to be despondent, suffering from depression as well as from loss of revenue during the hard economic times. His own home was mortgaged to his father-in-law to pay bills. There was a series of small legal disputes in circuit court over land he still owned in Tama County. In 1873, in poor health, he turned the studio over to his older son. In 1876 his younger son died unexpectedly. A comment at the end of his daybook, dated 1882, suggests increasing disillusionment. He recalled the years that he ran the Wetherby Gallery until "my health gave out—go to the land for health—made money—none since—lost 12 or 13 hundred \$ during the Panic of 1873—4—5—6—trust no one—paint not many portraits." He had paid his bills, provided for his wife and children, sold off his land, and sought alternative jobs, but ultimately he just scraped by.

By 1885, Wetherby had chosen to leave Iowa City. It is not known if he ever returned for a visit (he often lived apart from his wife and family). From Perry, in central Iowa, he wrote a friend about winning the best portrait-in-oils premium at the Iowa State Fair that year and mentioned the compliments he was now receiving. "These Artists at Des Moines were so much Pleased with my Pictures they call me the 'Veteran & Distinguished Boston Artist.' I do not know as I can Stand so much Praise." He had heard that life-drawing classes using a nude model had been offered in Des Moines the previous winter and now he was being urged to start an art school there. "Glad to see so much attention for Art. it looks well for the future of this new Country."

Many years were left in Wetherby's career that are

Left: The street-level entrance to Wetherby's upstairs studio was flanked by cases displaying examples of his ambrotypes. Two landscape paintings were mounted below. A portrait above the doorway and an oval portrait higher up advertised his painting skills. This was one of three locations that Wetherby rented for his studio during his years in Iowa City. All were on Clinton Street, which faced the state capitol.



Wetherby lettered this cotton banner and painted a daguerreotype in a hinged case on it. Such banners are extremely rare. Size: 27½" x 46".

unrecorded. He invented and applied for a patent in Philadelphia for a revolving scenery backdrop. He and a Mr. Denison founded a business that combined copying photos and operating an art school and health resort called Wetherby's in Rock Valley. The town had a population of 100 in 1880. It is hard to believe that there were enough students to support an art school there, or to find lucrative portrait commissions, but Wetherby probably also traveled to nearby communities looking for sitters. The move to Rock Valley would have represented a new start like the one he had made two decades earlier. Now he was touting the "high grade

of people in the northwest corner of Iowa [more] than any other part of the state." He believed its winters were warmer and a good three weeks shorter than those in Iowa City in Johnson County, which was "a good place to emigrate from." Little is known of his undertakings, other than that he practiced art and photography in northwest Iowa between 1887 and 1897.

Wetherby was 83 years old in 1902 and worked at the Quenemo Sanatorium in Kansas for two years (perhaps as a janitor). He died in 1904, and his body was brought back to Iowa City and buried in Oakland Cemetery—where some of the lifelong Iowa Citians he had once painted and photographed were also buried.

Isaac Wetherby practiced his arts for 60 years. Of the nearly 500 canvases that he painted, only a handful have been identified. Of his photographs, hundreds of images are lost. A few rare daguerreotypes dating from the mid-1850s and 1,450 glass-plate negatives survive in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa. The following pages showcase samples of this astonishing collection of images of early Iowa and the people who lived there.



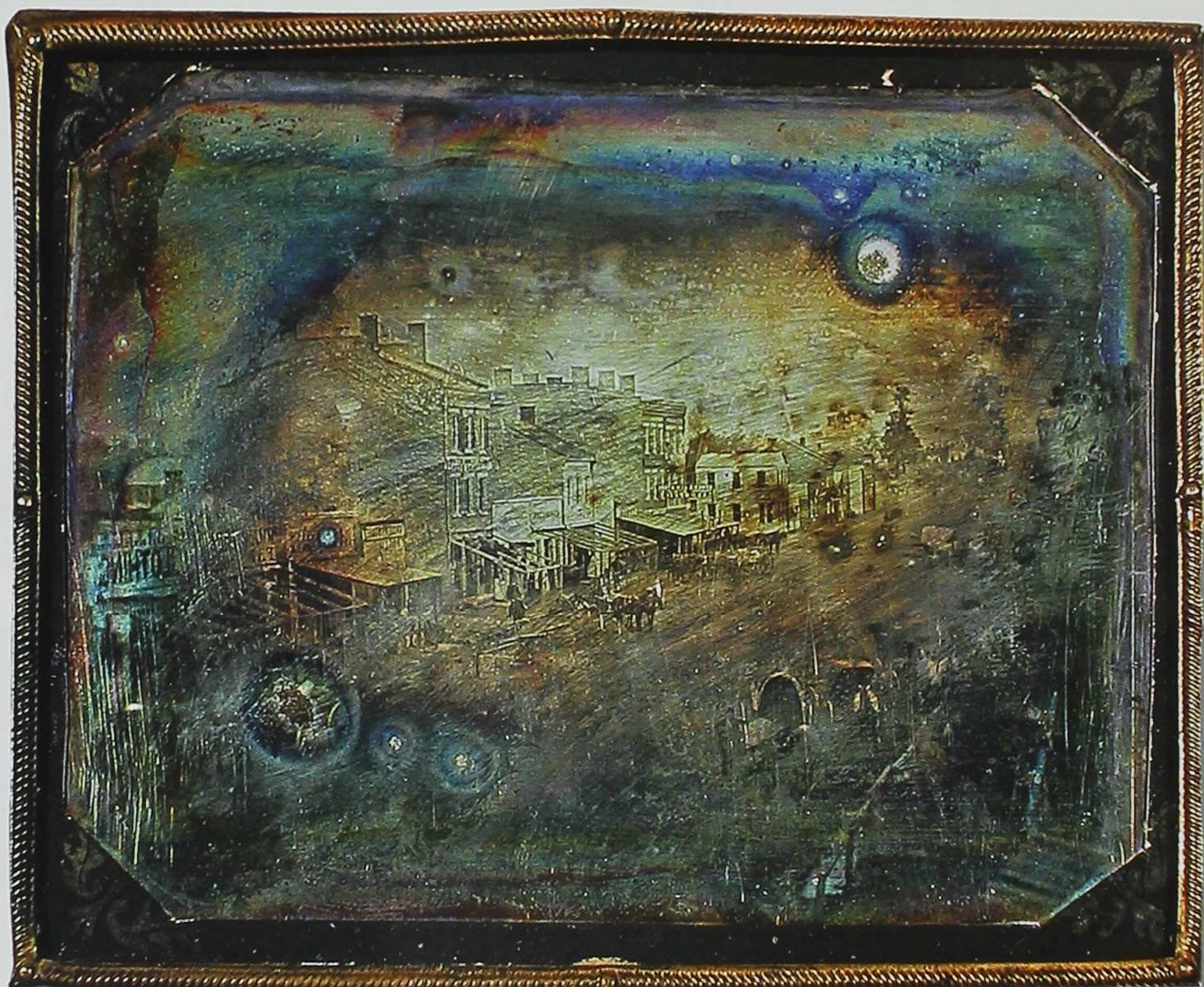
Wetherby's customers relaxed in this gallery before their sittings in his Iowa City studio. Portraits and landscapes fill the walls, and a stereoscopic viewer rests on the table. The gallery was praised locally as one "that just suits the artistic eye."

Marybeth Slonneger is the author of Wetherby's Gallery: Paintings, Daguerreotypes, & Ambrotypes of an Artist (Iowa City: By Hand Press, 2006). She has a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa in intermedia with a special interest in photography and a journalism degree in book design. She lives in Iowa City, about a block away from Wetherby's home.

Right: Graduating doctors from the University of Iowa (circa 1870) strike dignified poses. Large group photos were taken under Wetherby's skylight. To prepare a glass plate, he put a drop of emulsion on the center of the glass and rocked it slowly to spread the solution. The final image would be matted so it did not matter if the emulsion did not cover the entire plate—hence, the dark, uneven edges. And because the mat obscured all but the intended subject, the photographer could ignore what was in the periphery. These areas often reveal the inner workings of the studio, such as head clamps on an adjustable pole (far left), reflectors, backdrops, drapes, studio props, and even the occasional parent propping up a baby.

Skylights were common in early studios. Wetherby added one during the Civil War years, when demand for photographs was high. The individuals here appear to be Wetherby (with book); his employee, Mary Johnson; and his partner, James G. Evans. Evans is holding a Woodward Solar Camera, an early enlarger. Wetherby hired Mary Johnson —“my good & faithful printer”— in 1862, after her husband died at the Battle of Shiloh.

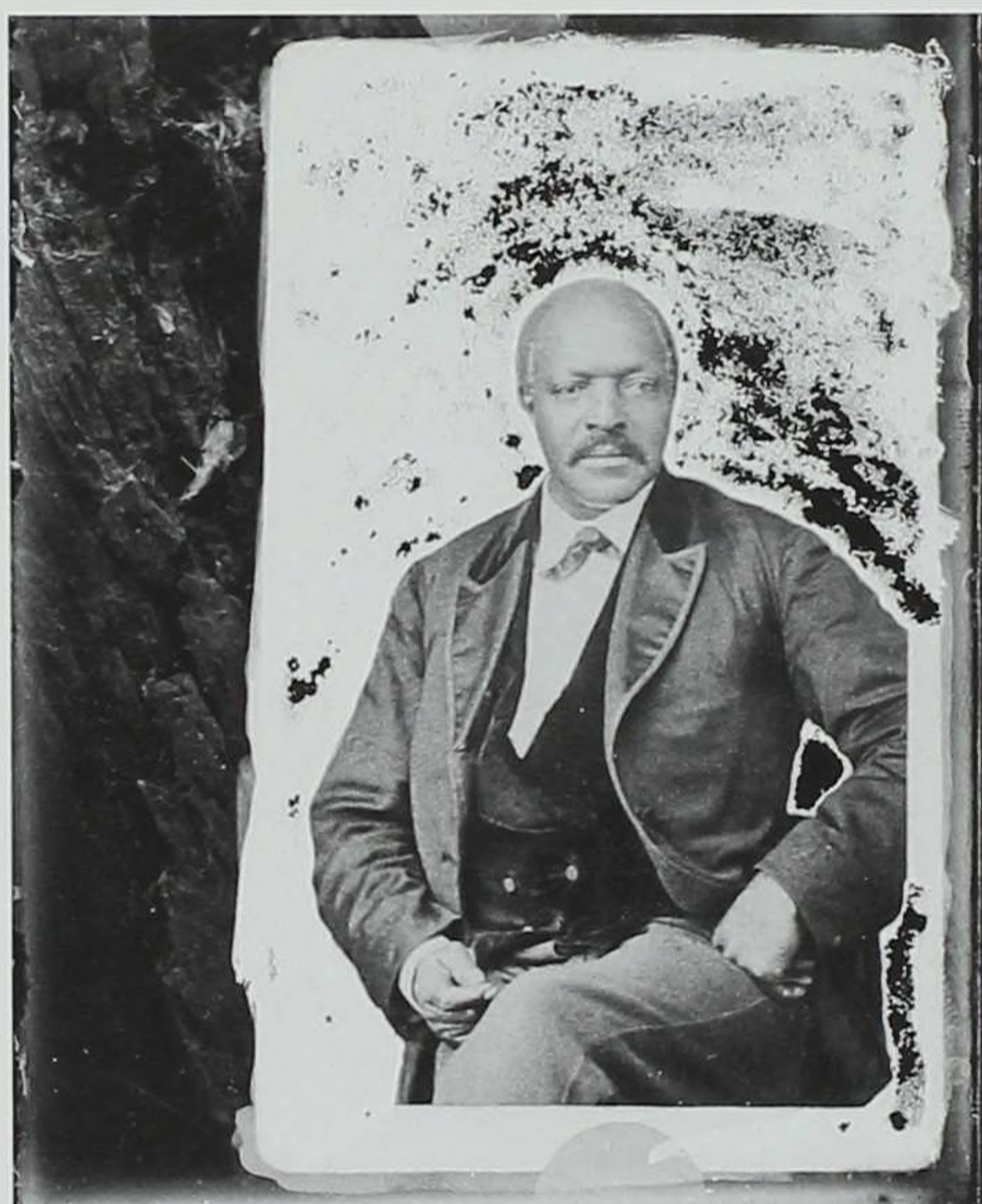




From the upper story of a nearby hotel, Wetherby photographed covered wagons and buggies in the commercial center of Iowa City, the young state's capital. This 1854 daguerreotype shows Clinton Street, between Iowa Avenue and Washington Street. Most early daguerreotypes were studio portraits taken under optimal lighting conditions, so Wetherby's choice of taking early daguerreotypes of the state capitol and the surrounding town life was most unusual. The bluish tarnish results from chemical interaction over the decades.



Born in Bohemia (today's Czech Republic), Frank and Catherine Bittner came to Iowa City in 1864 and lived in Goosetown, a Czech quarter of the city. Having this ambrotype taken in their new country may have represented a significant expense for the Bittners. Note that Wetherby scratched the names of the subjects on the outer edge of the glass plate.



Born a Kentucky slave, Albert Nuckals bought his and his wife's freedom. In Davenport he was a janitor at Griswold College, and their daughter Eudora was the first black graduate of Davenport High School.



Posed with her skirt billowing around her, this woman is believed to be Sue King. Daughter of a widowed carriage-maker, she first worked as a bookkeeper and later headed the Iowa City Life Insurance Company.

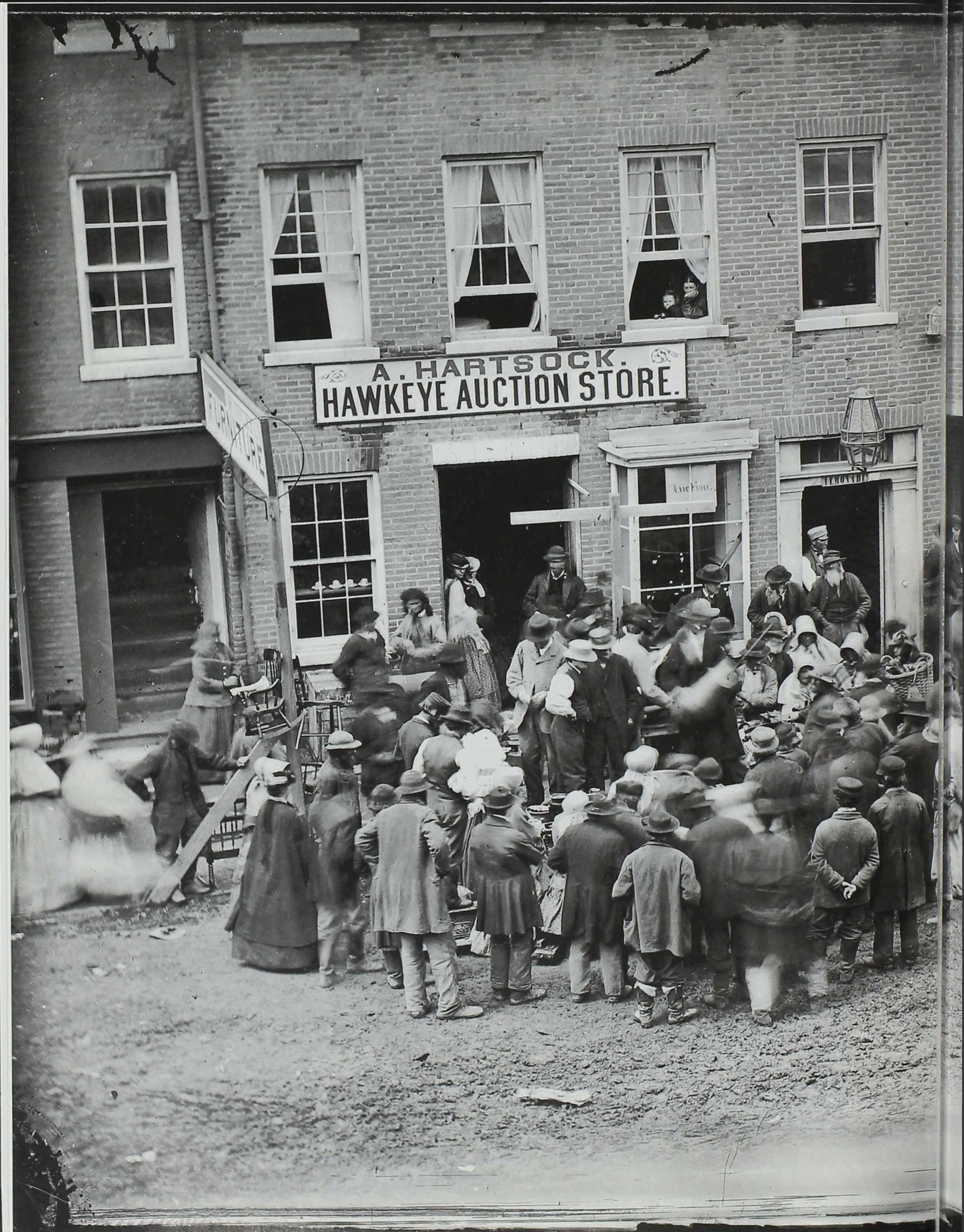


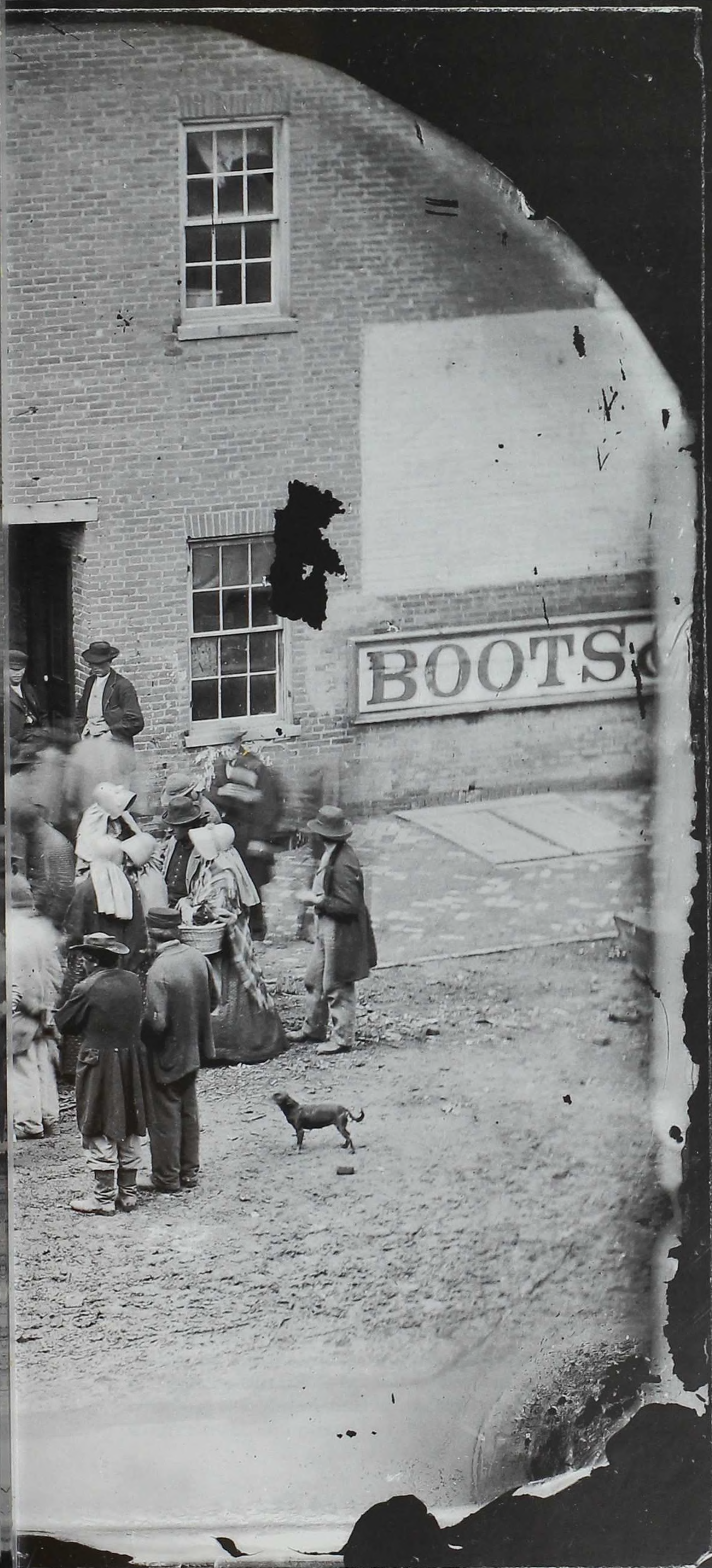
Wetherby photographed Hiram W. Love in two roles: as a stern Civil War soldier in uniform (above) and as a proud father helping his child hold still (right). Love was a machinist and tinner and served in the 2nd Iowa Cavalry.





Barbara Kostecky was born in Bohemia about 1846 and settled with her family in Iowa City in the early 1860s. She lived with her widowed mother and cabinet-maker brother. The brocade chair and floor covering appear often in Wetherby's images, although some subjects posed before an elaborate backdrop and were dressed in more elegant clothes than Kostecky's.





Women in bonnets and men in soft hats gather around auctioneer J. G. Starkey, outside Aaron Hartsock's Hawkeye Auction Store on Clinton Street. A man on the auctioneer's platform appears to be leaving with a butter churn; a woman and child watch from a second-story window; and a dog stands attentively in the dirt street. On the far left, several chairs are set up below a smaller sign advertising Hawkeye Furniture.



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This Meskwaki man, from the tribe's settlement near Tama, wears beaded leggings, necklaces, and other regalia. The image is labeled "Wild Indian." Wetherby must have thought that the man should be photographed in a more naturalistic setting because he is posed by a paper "boulder" draped with vines, branches, and leaves, and in front of a painted backdrop of hills. Although Wetherby had an early interest in Native Americans, he viewed them and certain immigrant groups in the stereotypical way of his era.



John Page, a saddler, sits in a fringed chair with his hand resting on a beehive. Keeping bees may have supplemented his income.



Miss Bliss, a milliner, poses awkwardly by a balustrade. Note the light reflector on the left and the painted backdrop on the right.



The image of this maid bears Wetherby's handwriting on the right edge: "lives at Mr. Oakes the Brick Maker." Nicholas Oakes lived in a stately Italianate-style brick house on East Court Street, completed in 1858.



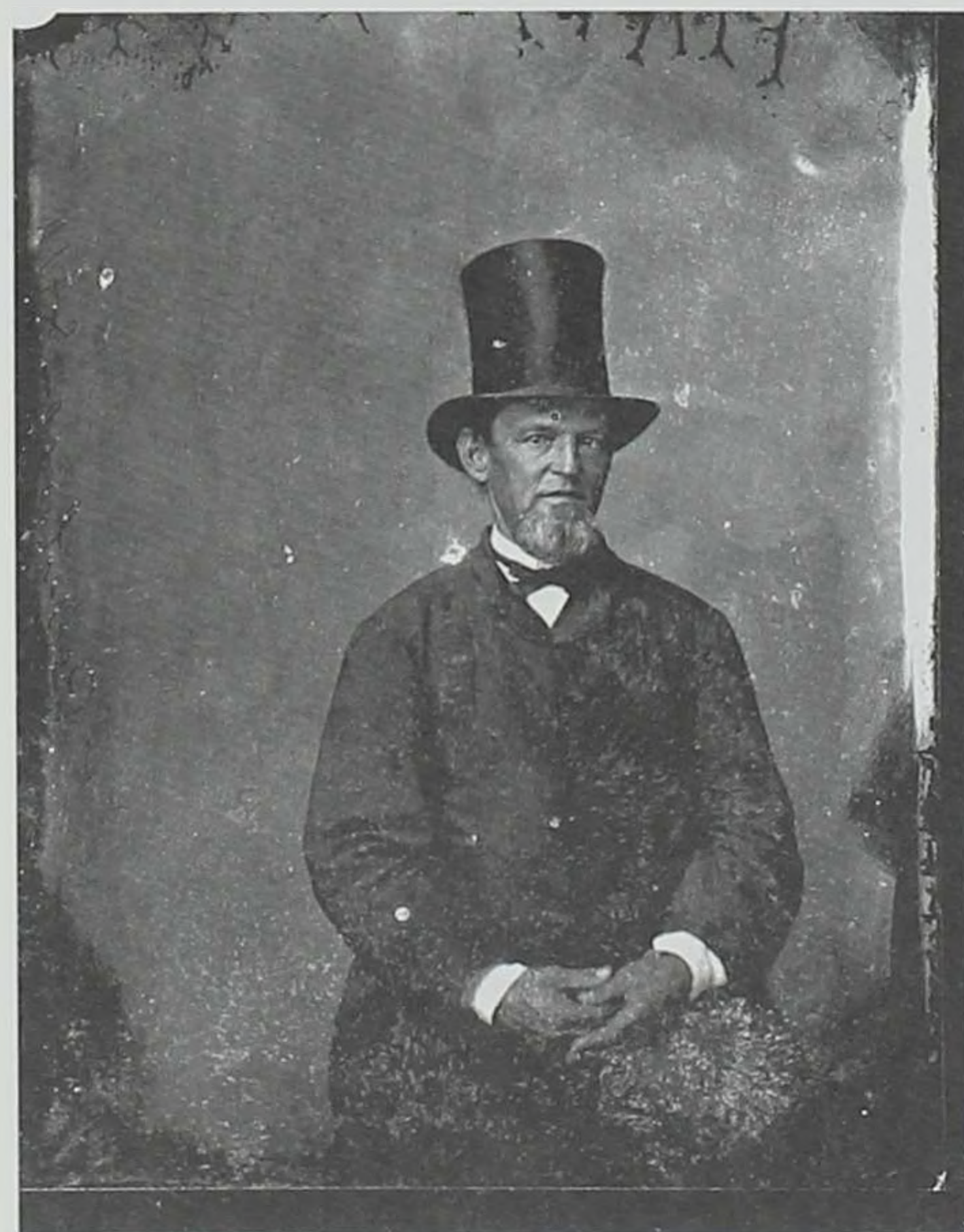
Ninety-year-old David Greeley was Wetherby's close friend and he traded board in his home for portraits by Wetherby of the Greeley family. Wetherby also painted campaign pictures of Lincoln and Douglas on Greeley's wagon.



Although unidentified, this buoyant mother and smiling children are unique among Wetherby's generally somber subjects.



John L. Bowers was probably a member of a Johnson County farm family of that name. The cause of his facial disfigurement is unknown.



Farmer, speculator, alderman, and merchant, Charles H. Berryhill sold his first dry goods out of a trunk stored under his bed. A county history notes that Berryhill "finally became insane and died."



Sarah Bloom was the mother of eight and wife of Moses Bloom, a Jewish clothing merchant from Alsace, France. Moses Bloom was a popular Iowa City mayor and later was elected to the state legislature.



J. Norwood Clark poses proudly in his Masonic shawl. Clark was born in Philadelphia in 1814 and was trained as a shoemaker by his father. He settled in Iowa City in 1853 and opened a general store called the Old Curiosity Shop; drums and toys filled its bay window. Of the six children born to him and his wife, Jane, only one survived. Norwood was elected city marshal, assessor, treasurer, and township clerk and trustee, and was a high-ranking Mason.



Harriet Hope Glenn was the daughter of a local grocer turned banker. H. S. Perkins, a Boston music professor, discovered and nurtured her fine contralto voice when he conducted a six-week music academy in Iowa City. Glenn later studied and performed in Europe. Wetherby photographed her in 1871.



This appears to be a self-portrait of Isaac Wetherby, dressed as a hunter with haversack, gun, and restless dog. He was around 50 at the time of this photograph. His son Charley was taking more responsibility at the studio and selling popular, new photographic formats (including cartes-de-visite) and a variety of frames and cases. Wetherby was giving himself up to painting more portraits and coloring photographs. Although he lived in Iowa City until 1885, his prolific years in the community were ending. His massive photographic legacy at the State Historical Society of Iowa testifies to his premier role as recorder and artist in mid-19th-century Iowa.